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# **FE or not FE**

**A play in two acts**

**Gary Husband, Paul Murphy and Joel Petrie**

## **Our Patrons**

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## **Dedication**

Dedicated, with thanks, to Salman Rushdie.

## **Correspondence**

The authors are grateful to PRISM's editorial team for publishing this highly experimental piece. It is a work in progress, and we welcome feedback and critique. The corresponding author Joel Petrie can be reached at [Joel.Petrie@hud.ac.uk](mailto:Joel.Petrie@hud.ac.uk)

Trying to learn about social research is like walking into a room full of noisy people. The room is full of cliques, each displaying a distinctive jargon and cultural style... but they disagree with each other on such basic issues as the nature of reality, the nature of knowledge, and the concept of truth.

Carspecken

# Setting

AN ACADEMIC CONFERENCE FOR DELEGATES FROM FE AND HE, HELD IN THE ATRIUM OF A LARGE FE COLLEGE. THE ACTION BEGINS AT THE CLOSE OF THE CONFERENCE.

## Dramatis personae

**FIONA:** An experienced FE lecturer recently embarked on belated postgraduate study. Her colleagues know her as Fe. *She is quietly revolutionary, having discovered that anything other than seeming compliance is highly problematic in the current FE context.*

**DOC:** An eminent Marxist academic, dapper and prone to laughter, who favours ethnographic research.

**JACQUES:** A Postmodernist dressed entirely in black, with closely cropped hair and a finely manicured goatee. He speaks with a pronounced Gallic accent, and chain smokes Gauloises. His name is really Bryn, and he hails from Blaenau Ffestiniog.

**DAI THE UNION:** The product of generations of Welsh mining socialists, he is the college's longest standing, most respected trade unionist.

**BIG MAC:** The college Principal. In post less than a year, he has radically restructured the college away from community provision towards entrepreneurial engagement. His real name is lost to history; but allies have nicknamed him Big Mac, and critics think he is contributing to FE's MacDonaldization.

**THE BEAR:** The institutional mascot. The college's new logo is branded prominently on each of its furry buttocks.

**NOTE:** Fe operates in the play as an Everywoman, representing the highly committed but often disgruntled women and men employed in the sector. Many of the other characters should be regarded as grotesques, or akin to the stock characters in commedia dell'arte. Any resemblance to actual people working in the post compulsory sector, living or dead, is purely coincidental...

# Act 1

*FE ENTERS THE ATRIUM, WHERE OTHER DELEGATES ARE ASSEMBLED, SITTING IN ANIMATED GROUPS. SHE CANNOT SEE ANY OF HER COLLEAGUES, SO PICKS UP A GLASS OF WINE AND HEADS FOR THE ONLY TABLE WITH A FREE CHAIR. SHE JOINS TWO MEN, WHO ARE SITTING IN A SILENCE THAT SUGGESTS RECENT HOSTILITY.*

**FE:** Hi, I'm Fe. I helped arrange the conference. Did you enjoy it?

**JACQUES:** Comme ci comme ça. The papers were a little pedestrian, and these events are pointless - we are witnessing the death of the social sciences - what do you make of Baudrillard?

**FE:** Well, I'm aware of his work...

**JACQUES:** Lyotard is more optimistic about the power of postmodernism to liberate, reinvigorate, and reinvent our studies. But I'm just here for the wine, which is especially poor by the way: nasty *brûlé* nose - it's clearly not French...

*JACQUES GOES TO THE BAR.*

**DOC:** Neither, of course, is Jacques...

**FE:** Eh?

**DOC:** ...he wasn't called that when I met him last. Odd chap, but harmless. I'm Doc, and the sessions I attended were very stimulating. Did you get anything out of it?

**FE:** Yes...

**DOC:** But...

**FE:** I was hoping to get more of an insight on theoretical perspectives. I've been doing small scale action research for years, but I've started a doctorate and have a paper to write comparing two methodologies. I'm struggling with it. Thinking about trying an autoethnographic narrative analysis, not because it's an approach I favour, just a way in. Worried it might seem glib though, you know, too playful.

*JACQUES RETURNS.*

**JACQUES:** Why not be playful? The relationship between the signifier and the signified, between symbol and what it represents, is arbitrary. You've read Saussure, of course?

**FE:** Er...

**DOC:** You're aware of the risks of this approach though? I had a doctoral student who wrote his impressive thesis as a detective novel; he was grilled about methodologies at his viva. Why, out of interest, start a doctorate now?

**FE:** I regret not doing one after my first degree in English. The most dynamic lecturers were Postmodernists then - I found them fascinating but infuriating too. I was a big fan of Rushdie and it was the time of the fatwa - arguments about death of authorship felt politically impotent, self-indulgent even.

**JACQUES:** But your understanding of *la mort de l'auteur* is partial and literal. It simply rejects finding meaning from identity as a sloppy approach: the author is simply a scriptor and the work's meaning changes with every rereading.

*JACQUES RETURNS TO THE BAR.*

**DOC:** While Jacques is away it might perhaps amuse you to learn

that those *murderers of the author*, Foucault and Barthes, are perhaps now the most cited academic authors of their generation! But to business. What methodological positions interest you?

**FE:** Well that was the first problem. I've been reading around ethnography and postmodernism, and the more I read the less I feel I know. I'm attracted to ethnography because it feels *most* like the research I've done in the past. But I'm not yet clear about how to differentiate ethnography from critical ethnography, or indeed *leftist* ethnography; and the wackier extremes of ethnography seem postmodern in their approach too. I feel like I'm running faster and faster (and in circles) down the wrong road.

*JACQUES RETURNS. HE HAS TWO BOTTLES OF WINE, AND A BOWL OF CRISPS.*

**DOC:** It might be useful for you to have a definition of the methodologies you're comfortable with.

**JACQUES:** As far as postmodernism is concerned don't concentrate on what it is, instead think about what it is not. Postmodern approaches critique the core belief systems underpinning modernism: just as we have outgrown the era of industrialisation, we have outgrown modernism; now we have mass-media, hyper-reality.

**DOC:** But history is important Jacques, too. Another way in might be to consider how these positions developed historically.

**JACQUES:** Puis-je vous aider? It isn't entirely straight-forward re postmodernism, but Nietzsche and Wittgenstein aren't a bad place to start. Nietzsche rejected rationalists' claims that they could describe objective reality; and Wittgenstein argued that the limits of language are the limits of the world. Then you've theorists like Lyotard who argues that postmodernism is defined by incredulity regarding meta-narratives, you know those old



fashioned foundational theories beloved of many ethnographers, like Marxism... (*HE CASTS AN IMPERIOUS, SNEERING GLANCE AT DOC*) ...that make over-blown claims for their applicability across all time, space and context? Anyway Lyotard would say meta-narratives are not objective, but are themselves the product of a particular sociohistorical context, and theorists like Foucault have pointed out that modernist discourse emerged from the battle between humanist ideas and traditional religious worldviews. You should appreciate that a leftist ethnographic approach has about as much credibility as buying the bones of Christ, or true pieces of the cross, from an unwashed, pock marked itinerant medieval monk; or bending over to kiss the ring of a lewd and lascivious Renaissance potentate!

**FE:** Well thanks for that Jacques... but if you're right how "postmodern" is life for a child in, say... a developing village in Africa?

**JACQUES:** Pah! Culpability for social ills lies with smug rationalism. Auschwitz, Stalinism, the prospect of nuclear annihilation, and the rest are the poisonous legacy of so called *enlightened* Eurocentrism...

**FE:** This isn't wholly helpful... One of my problems has been the apparent fluidity of ethnography as a methodology, which I guess starts to suggest postmodernist positions? My head was swimming even before this discussion...

**JACQUES:** I'd like to throw you a lifeline, mon ami; but I fear it gets even more complex. For instance, ethnography is also used by postmodernists, in a way that challenges canonical research methodologies. And methinks you protest too much with faux-naïf methodological lack of insight. You are entirely clear, I think, of your political perspective on all of this, you're just kicking against the pricks of difficult academic reading.

**FE:** ...a bit below the belt, no?!

**JACQUES:** Is it? I say you need more knowledge, and knowledge will give you more power over the subject matter; or as Foucault would have it knowledge and power are inextricably linked, two sides of the same coin.

**DOC:** Hmm... Foucault wasn't postmodernist though, he rejected the notion outright and favoured Kantian modernism..

**JACQUES:** (*CUTTING ACROSS DOC*)...are you saying Baudrillard was right?

*FE REGARDS JACQUES QUIZZICALLY: HE IS CLEARLY GETTING DRUNKER, AND MORE ABUSIVE, BUT ALSO MORE ERUDITE THAN HE AT FIRST SEEMED.*

**FE:** OK OK, let's not fall out.

**JACQUES:** No indeed, I merely wish to stress the link between power and knowledge: pouvoir-savoir...

**DOC:** I fear Jacques is still fighting the paradigm wars.

*JACQUES JUMPS TO HIS FEET, AND WAVES A FINGER IN DOC'S FACE.*

**JACQUES:** The war is won. Postmodernism dominates - no researcher with credibility can now claim neutrality, objectivity, or even access to a semblance of TRUTH. Everything the old guard believed in has melted into air, and dissolved into an insubstantial academic pageant, an ill-told fiction, a narrative...

**DOC:** Of course you're keen on fictions... Bryn!

**FE:** Bryn? I'm a bit confused...

**JACQUES:** (*BREAKING INTO WELSH*) Iesu Grist, diawl ...pardon... Regard bien, mon ami; whilst your self-evident confusion is to expected for someone from FE not HE, it's really quite simple. You won't know Deleuze and Guattari I suspect but look at these crisps. They are made from potatoes - rhizomes...

**DOC:** Potatoes are tubers, no?

**JACQUES:** ...they grow and spread under the earth, in networks or clusters. Society is the same - things only have meaning when they come together to act as a whole, but the cluster isn't intrinsically coherent. There are conflicts, everything is in process. This is the key conceptual underpinning of postmodernism, and dictates the type of data, theory or knowledge generated. Only naively rude Marxists like Doc here believe in coherence, in old grand narratives anymore. Ha! But I don't mean to be rude, je suis desole, Doc!

*JACQUES STAGGERS TO HIS FEET AND CIRCLES THE TABLE UNSTEADILY TO DOC; GIVING HIM (AS FAR AS IT IS POSSIBLE TO TELL FROM DOC'S EXPRESSION), A LESS THAN WELCOME POSTMODERN EMBRACE.*

*LIGHTS FADE TO BLACK.*

*INTERVAL.*

## Act 2

*FE, DOC AND JACQUES REMAIN IN DISCUSSION. DAI THE UNION ENTERS. A MOMENT LATER BIG MAC APPEARS IN THE DOORWAY. CLEARLY SEETHING, HE IS LOITERING WITH INTENT.*

**FE:** Ah, Dai. This is Jacques, and this is Doc. Doc, Jacques, this is my dear friend and colleague Dai, did you catch his presentation?

**DOC:** Nice to meet you. Regrettably not.

**JACQUES:** Enchantez. Moi aussi, non, tristement.

**DAI:** Welcome to the Comedy College, comrades; may I join you?

*DAI SITS.*

**DOC:** So what was the focus of your presentation, Dai?

**DAI:** *(GLANCING TOWARDS THE DOORWAY)* Perhaps now isn't the time, it appears to have been a touch contentious. *(TO FE)* I'd like to hear how you're getting on with your research anyway. *(TO ALL)* She's started a doctorate you know - crazy undertaking!

**FE:** Yes I'm starting to come to that conclusion too. I wanted to examine the impact of a new Principal and leadership style on the professional agency of lecturers in an FE college. I'm struggling with the methodologies I've chosen to consider: ethnography and postmodernism. I could use some inspiration.

**DAI:** I'm just a rough old qualitative action researcher really, it's all about the insider perspective, but I guess this is pertinent to ethnography?

**FE:** I've found this great idea on insider research, Dai - might appeal to you: the researcher has to navigate what taboos to avoid and bureaucrats to placate! There's another writer who argues insider/outsider research is a continuum with multiple dimensions, but isn't that a bit postmodern in its fluidity?

**JACQUES:** How could it not be? Whatever position you *assume you are taking* you cannot escape postmodernity: everything you utter, Dai, is mere ventriloquizing.

**DAI:** Hmmm! Nobody has their hand up my arse, brawd! If leftist ethnography refers to a tradition which explores the *social* significance of vocational education and training, and provides a *critical* and *structural* understanding of educational relationships, then I'm all for it. If it explicitly derives from neo-Marxism and recognises the pernicious, exploitative, oppressive impact of capitalism, then all the better.

**DOC:** That's exactly the sort of educational research that I'm sympathetic to, Dai. My perspective is that, as educational researchers, we need a return to a form of grand narrative lodged within an uneasy relation to modernism and the enlightenment process.

**JACQUES:** Merde! Postmodernism refutes all of this, camarades. We rightly refuse the grand narrative and insist on the local and the specific. These sites of educational practice and struggle should be prioritised: the broader politics that sets such practices within a relational context are a chimera.

**DOC:** On a more practical point, Fe, what data collection methods

do you have in mind, and what knowledge will be generated. How much of a difference would it make if you adopted ethnography over postmodernism, or vice versa?

**FE:** Well this is the crux of it really isn't it? Whatever approach I take it's the same reality I'd be describing.

**JACQUES:** Iesu... FFFFFu!!... Mon dieu! Va te faire enculer, crétin!!! You haven't listened to word I've said.

**DAI:** Perhaps she has but she doesn't agree with you, comrade?

**DOC:** (TO FE) How about this as an exercise? Draft your research questions so that they explicitly reference the methodology, such as: A postmodern examination of the impact of a new Principal and leadership style on the professional agency of lecturers in an FE college.

*BIG MAC HAS SIDLED OVER TO THE TABLE.*

**BIG MAC:** (TO FE) Have you sought approval for this research in college? I bloody well hope you aren't getting funding from us, this sounds like a vanity project to me; and in any case, staff feedback is consistently positive about the college leadership!

**DAI:** Ah, Principal. Bit tricky maybe, for *anyone* to get research approval or funding: the Head of HE was made redundant in the last restructure, and there isn't a research ethics committee anymore. All of the funding for postgraduate study has been withdrawn, too. As for consistently positive leadership.. you should have come to my presentation, perhaps?

**BIG MAC:** (INCANDESCENT WITH RAGE) Oh, should I? I wanted to talk to you about that presentation - I'm hearing you were very negative about the college. You need to be more corporate in your

thinking. And what the hell does "unbridled, rampant, neoliberal managerialism" mean? Did you say that?

*DAI WINKS AT FE. BIG MAC GLARES AT HIM AND STORMS OFF.*

**DOC:** So, "Big Mac" - after the burger? (*CHUCKLES*). Fitting, given FE's marketization!

**DAI:** I think it's more to do with a Machiavellian preference for being feared rather than loved..

**DOC:** (*TO FE*) Do you think findings from your research could be in any way significant across the sector?

**FE:** Well, I'd like to think so. Can't really see the point of doing it otherwise. I've a feeling too that the knowledge generated by my study, through whatever lens, would be fundamentally utopian - and however apparently differentiated methodologies appear to be, increasingly they seem kaleidoscopic, in flux, mutable..

**JACQUES:** Mutable - bravo!

**DOC:** I'm intrigued. What do you mean?

**FE:** ...I don't think I'm endorsing a postmodernist perspective necessarily Bryn, sorry, Jacques.. What I mean is that there seem to be so many overlapping positions, the one adopted could be arbitrary. The method adopted, the knowledge generated; so much will depend on the researcher's ideological position, perhaps? And by utopian, Doc, I would want the knowledge produced by my research to have the potential to engender change, or at the very least to acknowledge education as a site of struggle.

**DAI:** Amen to that, comrade!

**FE:** But I worry too, about the consequences of my postgraduate study.

**DOC:** How so?

**FE:** Despite the insanity of FE I love it, but what's the value of a doctorate working in FE? Will I end up being FE or not FE?

**JACQUES:** (*JUMPING UP, SLURRING*) Ours! Grisâtre ours!! There's a fucking big bear over there!!!

*THE COLLEGE'S MASCOT AMBLES INTO VIEW, FOLLOWED BY BIG MAC.*

**BIG MAC:** This is turning into an SWP meeting, I see no benefit in engaging with this discussion further. Dai, on further reflection your research constitutes gross professional misconduct - your career is over. BEAR! Escort Dai off the premises, and confiscate his staff card.

**JACQUES:** Putain!

*DAI AND FE EXIT GIGGLING CONSPIRATORIALLY, PURSUED BY THE BEAR. BIG MAC FOLLOWS THEM, THREATENING ALL MANNER OF RUIN.*

*DOC FINISHES HIS WINE, SHRUGS, PICKS UP HIS BRIEFCASE, AND LEAVES.*

*JACQUES CLAMBERS DRUNKENLY ONTO THE TABLE, WINE BOTTLE IN ONE HAND, GAULOISES IN THE OTHER.*

**JACQUES:** Blydi hel, hen ddiawl gachlud! That is the highlight of the conference mes amis! It's indicative of the entire postmodern aesthetic, a narrative pivot point, a turn from pompous academic discourse to camp farce!



*BLACKOUT.*

## ***Epilogue***

JACQUES IS IN A SINGLE SPOTLIGHT. THE ATRIUM IS SUDDENLY FULL OF THE SWEET AIRS OF A THOUSAND TWANGLING INSTRUMENTS. JACQUES' VOICE IS NOW A RICH BARITONE WITH A SLIGHT WELSH LILT (NOT UNLIKE RICHARD BURTON).

**JACQUES:** I have of late lost all my postmodern mirth. Behind my posturing lies a fear that my postmodern idols have feet of clay: might they have simply replaced old with new meta-narrative gods of their own febrile imaginings?

I fear too that this play displeased you; and make this speech to ask you for forgiveness. If this were play'd upon a stage now, I could perhaps justify my lapses as an *improbable fiction*, or defend a *pragmatic completion* as my last damned words. If all the world's a stage, and all the men and women merely players, can Actor Network Theory justify its lapses?

At any rate, this rough *research* I here abjure; I'll break with *methodology*, Bury it certain fathoms in the earth, and deeper than did ever plummet sound, I'll drown my *theoretical* books.

FADE SLOWLY TO BLACK.

## ***Finis***

## *Coda*

The real political task in a society such as ours is to criticise the working of institutions which appear to be both neutral and independent; to criticise them in such a manner that the political violence which has always exercised itself obscurely through them will be unmasked, so that one can fight them.

Chomsky, Foucault and Rajchman